VISIT…

UNDERGROUND PRODUCTIONS

NR25 up 2003

LADY
Styles and attitude

Ed Fella
Letters on America

STAB & SKIP
From Helsinki, the cleanest city on earth

On the road
Core, Finsta, Mander and Skize on tour

Beyond biting
Writers copy their favorite pieces

Norrköping
Ten year anniversary for Swedens biggest Hall of Fame

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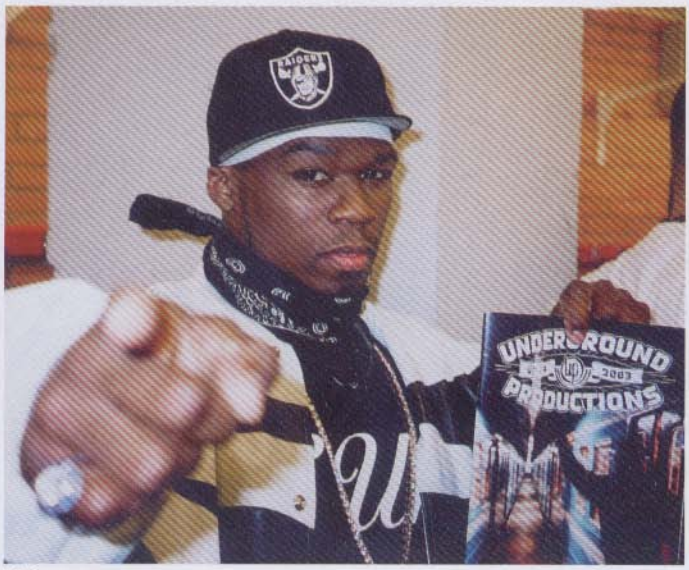

50 Cent.

UP 25 – December 2003

Why is so little known about Finnish graffiti? Some of the best writers come from Finland, but one seldom gets to see their pieces. UP sent two reporters to Helsinki to meet Skip and Stab. Stab had some things to say about biting – when it's okay and when it's not.

Some people who took biting to the next level are writers in Gothenburg, where the Great Paraphrase was organized this autumn. In this battle, participants were encouraged to copy their favorite piece. Gothenburg is also home to Lady, who's been the talk of the town, not least because of his cool pieces. For Lady, graffiti is important: "if you're going to write, you have to give it everything you've got", is one of the things he says.

Another gentleman who takes letters seriously lives in the USA. Ed Fella may not be a graffiti writer, and falls into the "not-graffiti-but-still-cool" category. For more than thirty years, Ed has been designing letters in blackbooks, of which he now has more than 80. "My books are like beautiful flowers, just to be looked at," says Ed.

During the summer, Skize from Stockholm decided to go on a graffiti tour. He brought Mander, Finsta and Core along for the trip. See pictures on page 32.

The next issue of UP is due out in late February. The deadline for photos is January 15th. See the bottom of this page for information on how to submit photos.

How to get published

1. Send in your photos or texts to:
   UP, Box 773, 120 02 Årsta, Sweden
2. Make sure photos are of good quality.
3. If a piece is a part of several pieces – send in all of them.
4. Don't send the same photos to other magazines.
5. Enclose the following info: text on the piece, who made the piece, when it was done, where it was done and anything other interesting about the piece.
6. If your photos don't get published – please try again!

Photos sent to us will be put into our photo archive and is considered as UP's property. We don't take any responsibility for material forwarded to us.

Politicians out of synch

The Swedish Parliament has decided to increase the maximum sentence for criminal damage from six months to twelve by the New Year. Swedish police will have powers to bodily search people they suspect of planning to perform such damage. Moreover, attempted criminal damage will be punishable. It is tragic that the majority of parliamentarians don't see that there are other ways to encounter young people expressing themselves esthetically, especially as the law is being passed at the same time as zero tolerance towards graffiti is being reconsidered in so many other areas. Outside parliament, more and more people have seen past the false image of graffiti that zero tolerance was built on. Increasingly more exhibitions, workshops and legal graffiti events are being organized about the country. Zero tolerance is built on the mistaken premise that graffiti is criminal damage. But graffiti doesn't destroy – it transforms.

Concrete walls, electricity relays, trash cans, façades and train sides – all are surfaces that fill a function to prop up bridges, distribute electricity, collect rubbish, enclose our homes, transport us to work and pleasure. These surfaces can also be used for art and communication. Commercial companies do so with the backing of the law. But young people who wish to decorate their environment at no gain are imprisoned.

Should graffiti be permitted everywhere? No, but places exist where graffiti could be allowed. Much of the graffiti that is made illegally today could be legal, and wouldn't cost society anything.

Is all graffiti good? No, but society gets the graffiti it deserves. If more respect had been shown to graffiti, writers would probably have treated the rest of society with more respect.

The law that has been passed is an extension of the policies that have been fostered for more than 15 years, and that have failed to decrease illegal graffiti. Instead of re-thinking failed policies, they are embraced even harder. The result will probably be the same: more quickly-scrawled graffiti, the kind society understands the least.

During spring, we are preparing a special issue of UP about the unpleasant legal consequences of graffiti – an issue on getting caught. Tell us about your experiences or any questions you may have!

Read more about this law (in Swedish) at
www.riskdagen.se/bik/datum.asp?datum=2003-10-29

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Cover Photo by Jacob Kimvall:
Norrköping ten years anniversary

Välkommen Maximilian!

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Allt flerfaldigande förbjudet enligt lag
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Layout: Torkel, Malcolm
English translation: Martin Thomson
Photos: UP, and every one supporting us
Ads: Tobias Barenthin Lindblad
ISSN: 1401-8659
Printed by Abildgaard Grafisk, Denmark 2003

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Painting at the Great Paraphrase jam in Gothenburg, August 2003

Beyond biting

The practice of biting – stealing someone's style – is one of the greatest taboos of graffiti culture, where the development of a personal style is an integral part. But what happens if you go a step further, and copy an entire piece rather than use someone else's ideas for your letters?

In July, a piece appeared in the harbour of Norrköping, Sweden's largest Hall of Fame. It looked exactly like a painting Dwane had made several years earlier on a subway, but Dwane had no idea who did it.

In August the Great Paraphrase battle was organized in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, in which participants competed in copying their favorite writer's art. The two events weren't related but are based on the same idea, with a slightly different slant.

"I guess I'll have to take responsibility for the piece," says Casan when, after some research, I ask him if he did the Dwane piece in Norrköping.

"I'm tired of repeating myself."

"I can just as soon steal someone else's piece as do one myself, it's all the same. It's more like solving a crossword puzzle. And it's fun to trick people. You shouldn't take things too seriously. The graffiti world is like a soap opera; we wanted to see what the effect would be, but made the mistake of telling someone that Dwane hadn't done the piece."

"It felt like being a street artist copying some famous painting by Van Gogh or someone. I'm tired of repeating myself. Writing is important to me, but I have no artistic ambitions any more."

You have a style of your own. Isn't it more fun doing your own pieces?

"I'm not active. I write very seldom, too seldom for it to be good. If I had put more into it I might have been good, but now I don't write to obtain results. I almost consciously decide not to be original. I paint at home, but that's not graffiti. I'm a little tired of graffiti but can't let it go. It's the activity itself that is fun."

Did you learn anything from Dwane's work when you copied his piece?

"Oh yeah, you do the same curves and movements. People should copy more, but not bite. It gave me much more than to paint something of my own, you tend to break your old habits. Most people repeat themselves."

A few months later, observant onlookers might have seen a stream of writers disappearing behind a parking building in the outskirts of a Gothenburg suburb. The back of the building, which abuts a tangled woodland area, is a long concrete wall and is one of Gothenburg's oldest Halls of Fame. It is illegal to write there, but Gothenburg still boasts a tradition of live graffiti there every summer.

With the help of a spray paint store, Ollio had invited participants to The Great Paraphrase.

"I've had the idea for a long time that it would be fun to try to copy another writer's piece. Get some pals together and see if you can reach your idol's level," says Ollio. "We hadn't had a jam that summer, so I asked this spray paint store if they wanted to sponsor the competition with some roller paint and spray cans to the winner. They said okay, so we decided to roll five days later."

"It wasn't too complicated to organize: I mailed an invitation (see insert) to 15 people. My idea was that it would be sent on, but I guess I wasn't too clear on that. But the news also spread through people we met and visitors to the store."

"My idea was that you didn't have to copy the painting but do a free interpretation of it, and it didn't have to be a graffiti piece, but any other piece of art too. But most people chose to copy pieces as precisely as possible."

Copying is a very sensitive subject in hip-hop culture...

"When you bite, you copy from someone else but pretend it's your own thing. Our idea was more of a homage. The message is: this is the best piece I've seen in my whole graffiti career."

"Everyone is inspired and bites off others, which is how graffiti culture is built up. If you examined every participant in the battle, you could probably see how their style was influenced by those they chose to copy.

In some cases it's obvious, not just in the style. Kid, of course, chose to copy one of the great train writers, since he writes a lot on the tram cars."

The battle shows what different conditions graffiti writers work under in different parts of Sweden, though the same laws apply throughout. In Stockholm, an illegal battle would probably be stopped by the police, and few Stockholm writers would bother to spend time on a jam that would most likely result in their fleeing from the cops. But it seems to work in Gothenburg.

"The atmosphere in Gothenburg has always been more open. As long as I've painted here there have never been any graffiti police as far as I know. Also, this was quite a small get-together, only about fifty people showed up", Ollio says.

"But I didn't put anything out on the internet. That would have been taking it too far. It was all kind of underground. A few people showed up to look at pieces, and were happily surprised to see a whole bunch of people there."

Ollio nominated a jury to judge different aspects of the pieces. Acte would judge style, Otek would judge technique. Camilla, who is a product designer, was to judge which pictures were of the greatest interest without reference to graffiti culture. She says:

"I'd imagined that the writers would dare to think for themselves and do their own thing more, but they were like: 'This wasn't quite the same here'. I wanted to see who had their rhythm on and painted with fluency and self-confidence."

So how they painted was important too, not just the result?

"I thought so. To dare to compete, challenge the original and try to make it better. But I had to let go of that since most people just wanted to do a copy. I think the winner, Qiter, did a piece that was better than the original. But he did a chrome piece just like the original. I would have liked more color."

Malcolm Jacobson

Invitation:

The Great Paraphrase

Graf jam on Saturday, August 23 at 2.00 p.m. This graf jam is aimed at celebrating the great masters, doing a copy of your favorite piece. It's also a competition where the best copy or paraphrase wins. Simply copy your favorite piece as best you can, or do a new interpretation, there are no rules, but judges will be there to choose the best entry. The prize is a sixpack of cans and a nice diploma!

Questionaire

We asked the original writers this:

1. How do you feel about your piece being copied?

2. How do you think he or she has succeeded?

3. Could it have been as if you had done the piece?

4. What do you think of your original piece today?

We asked the copiers this:

1. Why did you participate in the battle?

2. Why did you choose this piece and where did you see it?

3. In which way has the original artist influenced your writing?

4. Did the piece end up like you had thought?

All participants in the Great Paraphrase battle except Rail live in Gothenburg.

Arsle by Arsle.

Arsle from Stockholm was copied by Kid:

1. Cool!

2. Good.

3. First I thought I'd done it. But I'm more picky. It's sloppy that the background red doesn't go in behind the letters.

4. It's not the best I've done. It was well-made, but I don't like the shape of the letters.

Kid from Gothenburg copied Arsle:

1. It was a fun idea, I hadn't though of joining, but the more I thought about it, the more fun it was.

Arsle by Kid.

2. Because I like Arsle's style. This piece is really cool. I bought UP 15 just because I fixated on this piece.

3. Through his way of writing, big, simple, stylistically pure stuff.

4. No, I didn't have enough paint and did it a bit too fast. I knew it was going to be hard to do a piece that was as clean. I saw it more as a fun thing than a competition.

The by Kegr.

Kegr from Denmark was copied by Qiter:

1. It's fun.

2. There's a lot of resemblance, and it feels weird to look at it. The letters especially are like mine. Only the character is different. Certain details are very good, and others not so much. The way he's holding the cup is done better, because on mine it looks very strange. The character I did reminds me so much of a certain person that it can't be changed much. But his character is good. It's just a bit thinner and looks crazier and more confused than mine, which is more relaxed. Mine looks like he knows what he's doing. This one looks like he's never taken these pills before.

3. The letters are very like mine. Even the spaces between the letters are identical. It's amazing. It looks like I did parts of it. There are some details I wouldn't have done. I'd like to meet the guy who did it.

4. When I did it, it was my best "The" piece. It's in a pretty area, and the whole thing was

The by Qiter.

really nice. I still like it a lot because it reminds me of my brother and another person who was there. It's probably still my favorite "The".

Qiter from Gothenburg copied Kegr:

1. It wasn't at all planned. I'd heard about it, and decided to enter just the previous day.

2. I thought it was really simple and yet powerful. I don't have so many magazines or books, but I saw this in the book Overground.

3. He motivates me by being so very active. At the same time, you probably incorporate stylistic influences subconsciously as well. I don't know how much of it is noticeable, but I guess that's for others to judge.

4. By and large. But it was tough fighting your own thoughts about letters. That was the real challenge, actually. I thought the letters came off better than the character. It was hard getting the same slant and proportions that he did.

Raf and tags by Zeray and Rail.

Raf by Raf.

Raf from Stockholm was copied by Zeray and Rail:

1. That they chose this piece and made an almost identical copy of it is fun. At least the thought seems to have been good. Biting can be either jarring or okay depending on its purpose and results. But this isn't even biting, but pure copying.

2. The guys put in everything I thought was essential in the text, background, colors and patterns. They left out a matchstick man that I had painted next to it, but that's probably just as well, because the message with him never really got across.

3. My first reaction was that there must have been a mistake. Wasn't I supposed to see a copy someone had made of one of my pieces? Then I looked at the background and saw that it really was a copy.

4. Sometimes, when you look back on different times you can either ask yourself what the hell you were doing or get really pleasantly surprised. In this case, the latter applies. I did this piece solo. I can't remember how I felt at the time, but I think I was quite satisfied. With a stress on "quite". Four out of five stars.

Zeray copied Raf together with Rail:

1. I kinda got an invitation. So I thought it would be fun.

2. We wanted to take an old Stockholm writer. Raf was always a writer whose work we had seen a lot of, and who we thought was cool when we were younger. We went on the Internet the previous day and found a piece he had done. We chose this one because we thought it was the most representative of his style among the pieces we found online.

3. I don't know if he has affected my writing that much. He's written in such a lot of shady and cool places. That's mainly what I like about him as a writer.

4. I don't know how good a likeness it was, because we didn't have a photo. We just drew it without colors from the computer. So we sort of chanced it, and it probably didn't turn out exactly like it was. But we did the best we could. We had checked the Internet for old tags from Stockholm, the sort of thing we used to see when we started writing. We did the tags in the background.

We were not able to reach Force who was copied by Zappa.

Zappa from Gothenburg copied Force:

1. I thought it sounded fun. I'd decided to go writing that day anyway. It wasn't very thoroughly planned.

Don't you think it's wrong to copy others?

No, I think it's fun. As long as you do it openly and don't say it's your own idea.

2. It was a last-minute thing. I hadn't planned much. I looked through some old magazines and found this in an Adrenalin burner special, from Hamburg. I think it's quite funny. It's different from all the other pieces that are all pretty homogenous in that magazine.

3. I don't know that he has. After all, I've only ever seen this piece. But maybe he did back then, when the magazine was new.

4. No. The original has green and yellow fill-ins, but my yellow paint clogged up, so I had to improvise a little. It's not a straight copy. I've changed a few details. If I'd had more time, I might have made some more careful choices and changed the sketch to my own tastes.

Force by Zappa

Character by La Mano.

La Mano character by Winter.

La Mano from Spain was copied by Winter:

1. It sounds very strange.

Winter from Gothenburg copied La Mano:

1. Because it's fun to write with a bunch of others and I thought it would be fun just to imitate someone. We got this idea this summer when we were going to paint at the Vitlycke museum. Not the idea of a jam, but that it would be fun to copy a known piece.

2. I didn't have time to plan very much. I was working until three that day, and checked out some graffiti mags at work. I chose this because I like La Mano's stuff a lot.

3. I don't know if La Mano has influenced my work that much. But it makes me happy to look at his work. He does great shapes, colors and thick black lines. Comic-book drawings, quite simply, my favourite thing.

4. I'm happy with the result. I wish I'd had time to do a bit more background, but I couldn't because I showed up much later than everybody else. But I still think it works.

Swet by Swet.

Swet by Ollio.

Force by Force.

Jack by Jack.

Jack from Gothenburg was copied by Gas:

1. It's good fun.

2. Really good. Except for the colors, I must say there's a good resemblance. I guess he didn't bother to look up the colors. But the tones and a lot of the lettering are the same.

3. No, I really don't think so. There's a lot of resemblance, but there are a few details, like some curves that aren't quite in my arm. The letter c is different. I'd never have done it quite like that. It's fractions here and there that make the difference.

4. As such, I'm not crazy about it. I almost think he's done it better, actually. It was nothing special, so I think his choice of this piece is a bit unexpected.

Why do you think Gas chose this piece?

It has fairly simple shapes and tones, so it's pretty good to copy. In Gothenburg, we've always been a bit apart, so we tend to get inspired by each other. It's almost a bit inbred.

Who would you have chosen to copy?

Jack by Gas.

I'd have chosen Bando, or Disey, actually.

Gas from Gothenburg copied Jack:

1. Why not? It sounded fun, I thought. It was fun to see what everybody would do, what their influences were.

2. Since I know Jack it felt more personal to choose him than Bates or someone like that. At the same time, he's been one of the greatest influences on me, both technically and stylistically. I still think he's one of the best of Gothenburg. I actually think he's done better stuff, but there are often characters, and that's not quite my thing.

3. He was the first writer I got in touch with who's a bit older than me and has been writing longer. I thought he was a lot better than all the other writers, so I took to his stuff more. Also, he's a really nice guy.

4. Just about. I didn't have quite the right colors. Otherwise, I think the proportions were about right.

"You can see that I'd written Swet a hundred times, but he'd only done it once."

Swet from Denmark was copied by Ollio:

1. I was a bit shocked: at first I thought it was something I'd done, but it looked strange. I think it's a stupid idea. Graffiti is all about everybody fighting to get their own name out with their personal style. They ought to do their own pieces instead. At the same time, it's a pat on the back for me because someone likes my stuff.

2. At first I thought it was pretty good, but on closer inspection I think it's far removed from my piece.

3. No, too many things are distorted. He didn't find the things I look for in my style. The things I want to be correct. The view is okay at first, but the style isn't hundred per cent. The arrows and joins, the composition, the sweep that were in the original aren't there. You can see that I'd written Swet a hundred times, but he'd only done it once.

4. That was my style then. The fun thing is remembering the circumstances around the piece. I was writing together with Dåser. We'd been on a canoeing trip in the wilds for four days.

Ollio copied Swet:

1. I had the idea of the jam, so I couldn't get out of it. I could have been a judge, but painting is such fun I couldn't stay out. But I didn't participate in the competition, since I'd arranged it and nominated the jury.

2. It was very hard to choose. I looked through a lot of old graffiti magazines. It was during my first years as a writer that I was most influenced by others, now I get my influence from many different areas. I was thinking of doing a painting by someone who isn't a writer, but then I decided to do a classical piece. Before, I used to think that a handful of writers were the best. That's why it was easier to choose a slightly older piece. In my first years, Swet was one of my great favourites. I chose this piece because it was done in Gothenburg and is really cool. I saw it printed in the Gothenburg magazine The Blob.

3. He inspired me to do proper productions – rolling, doing a background – and not just stand at a legal wall doing a little piece that will disappear among all the other pieces and tags. To see the totality. When I wrote under the name Mouse I used to bite his style, but it never turned out very well.

4. It was a pretty good likeness. It's really hard to do a copy of a wildstyle piece. I hadn't painted that way in a long time.

Sabe by Sabe.

Sabe by Lady.

"Biting ... would be like cheating on your wife after 20 years..."

Sabe from Denmark was copied by Mabe:

1. I don't think it's cool. This is a very weird project.

2. He's succeeded in copying it. But anyone can do that.

3. Well, yeah, I did it. He just copied it.

4. Nothing special. It's just an ordinary silver.

Mabe copied Sabe:

1. I thought it was a fun idea. I've been writing for a long time, and used different pieces earlier in my career. When I started out, I'd take letters from pieces and exchange the name for my own.

Do you still do that?

No, that's straight biting. But it was fun to try to imitate someone else's piece to the best of my ability. It was very tough.

2. I took a piece that had meant a lot to me. It's sort of marked me somehow. When I saw it for the first time, my whole idea of style was changed. Maybe it wasn't this exact piece, but it ment a lot to me.

3. In that it's so playful. Sabe sort of just does his thing. If you look at his letters, they're often really weird. I think it's fun that it can be that way. That there is someone who is so good, who doesn't care about perfect appearance. But he's so good, it's perfect anyway. I felt there were certain similarities to what I wanted to do. He's just got a really relaxed attitude to letters.

4. The picture I had was taken from the side, so I had some trouble getting the proportions right. But I thought it was a pretty exact match anyway. I think he had olive green outlines. I did black ones. Then I did my own background based on how I thought he usually does it. I put in some rectangles, that I have seen him use in fill-ins sometimes.

Sabe doesn't think it's such a cool idea to copy other people's pieces.

Biting is such an incredible taboo, and when you're my age you just don't do it. It would be like cheating on your wife after 20 years of marriage. I did this basing myself on the idea that you were to copy a writer who has influenced you. Every writer has to start somewhere. I'd be glad if someone did this to me. From my corner, it's an homage.

Phiy by Phily.

Phily from Stockholm was copied by Fme:

1. It just feels like a good thing.

2. I think he did a good job copying it.

3. At first I didn't see it wasn't my piece. But then I saw that there was something else above it and that the wall looked different. It feels a bit strange to see this one because I don't think I have a photo of it myself. The real one, I mean. But I couldn't have done it today. This was a few years ago, and I've developed a lot since then.

4. I did it at the Wall Street meeting in Germany. I didn't have any cans, but I managed to borrow some from others who had some left over. The lettering as such isn't that impressive, but on the whole it was okay, especially the 3-D effect and the small text above it.

Phiy by Fme.

Fme from Gothenburg copied Phily:

1. Battle... I thought it was more like a fun jam. I hadn't written in a long time because I'd been abroad for a long while, so it was fun to meet everybody. And when Ollio and the others hold a jam it's usually a good time.

2. I don't know. It's a different yet quite quick style. Not that I do a style like that myself, but I like Phily. The old stuff anyway. Now I think he's lost it.

3. I wouldn't say that he has. But I don't know. I don't write very often. Maybe he did for a while.

4. Not at all. I had the wrong caps and it was just generally bad. The lines were too thick and some things were too big and all.

Tags by Punk.

Punk copied different tags:

1. I didn't see it so much as entering the battle. I turned up late and hadn't intended to do any writing. But there was some space left, so I borrowed a can and did some tags.

Why did you choose to do tags?

Because it's such fun to do other people's tags. I wanted to do the ones who are my idols. Edler is a bombing legend in Gothenburg. He was active before my time, but I've heard that he was the all-time biggest in Gothenburg. There are even some tags left, and I think they're really beautiful. I think O'clock is like the world's greatest tagger. Smak is the biggest in Gothenburg since I started. He was bombing a hell of a lot, and I still think his tags are great. And then I did a classic wave at the bottom, because that's really 1990s Gothenburg. You did a few tags, and then you waved the rest of the wall. It's actually a cool Gothenburg tradition that people don't keep up any more much. You see it more on trains, but before you could see it on entire buildings. That's fresh. Real mindless destruction.

3. They're my idols. Edler isn't much of an idol since he was before my time. But Dys is a huge idol. So is Smak. That's what one would see. And I still have a lot of respect for what they did.

4. I didn't do justice to the Smak tags. I did quite well with the Dys tags. I didn't try to copy the O'clock tags. But I tried to do Edler, Smak and Dys like they would have done themselves. It doesn't look like Edler's tags. You can see I did them, but they turned out pretty cool.

"you can always get new ideas"

Duane by Dwane.

Dwane was copied by Casan

1. What fun. It's a fun aspect that people amuse themselves like this. I see it as a compliment, it's such a lot of trouble that I could never take it the wrong way. I was opposed to biting when I was younger, but you can always get new ideas. When you've used a good idea, you can move on; it's mainly a pity on the one who plagiarizes you. Funny that it's happened so rarely. Usually it's just beginners who out-and-out copy.

2 & 3. The first thing you see is that there isn't the same tautness in the lines. The big picture is correct, but he hasn't really looked properly. I did the triangles in the fill-ins because there were a few blotches, but I'm sure they're right.

4. It was okay, it turned out pretty much as I had imagined. It's a really funny choice to use this piece. It's the last piece you should use by me. It's meaningless. Nothing special happened when it was done, I've hardly ever had any comments on it. It all feels like a private joke.

Duane by Casan.

Casan copied Dwane:

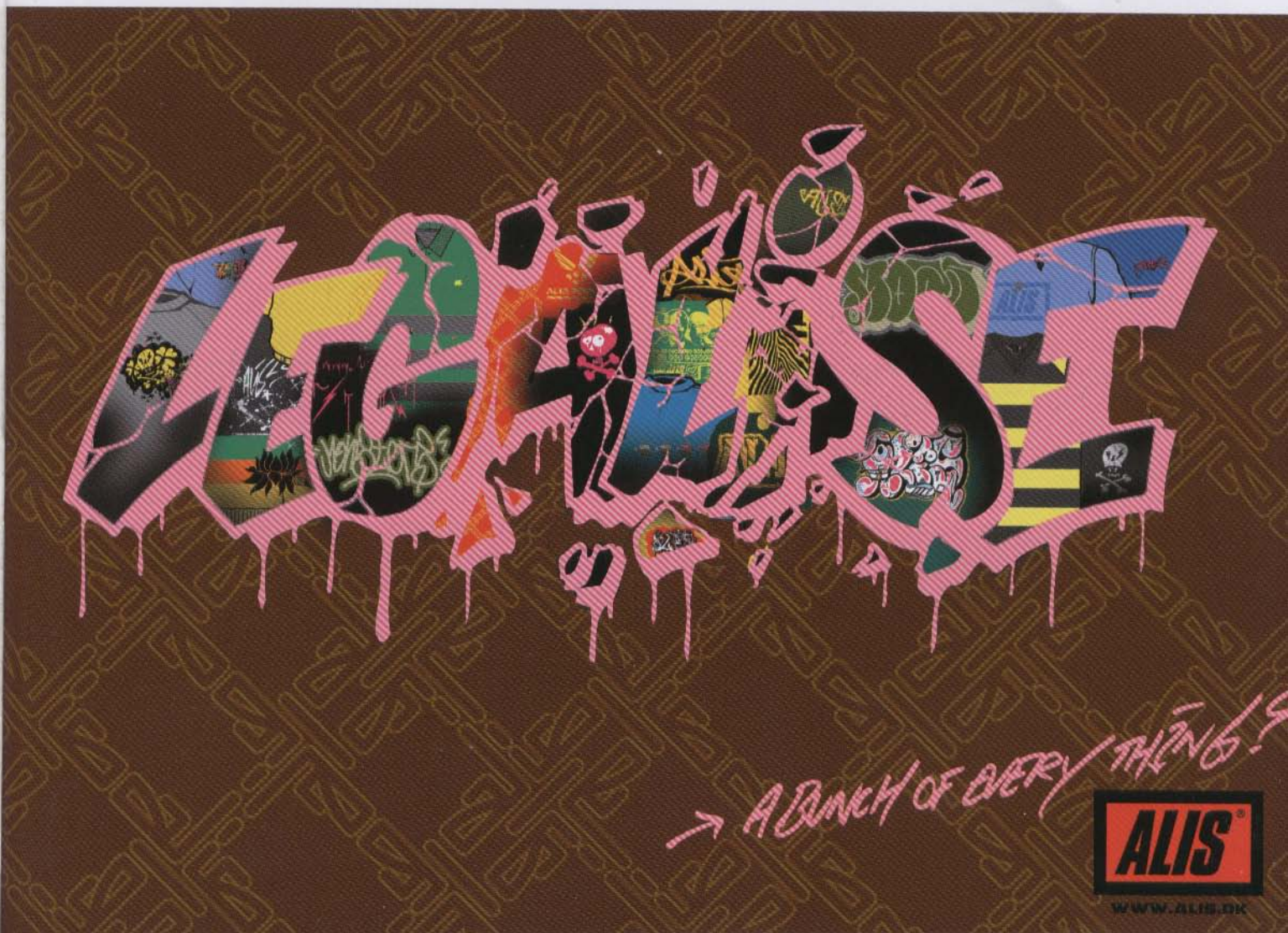
1. *Casan's Dwane copy isn't part of the battle; see main article.*

2. The piece has been in Kilroy. I wanted to do something fairly recent so that people would think that Dwane had done it. It was fun to choose a piece by Dwane because we used to spend a lot of time together when he was a teacher at the Aerosol school in Uppsala in the early 90s.

3. Everything Dwane has done is good, he's the best in Sweden in his chosen field. He's mastered everything in graffiti. He is my great favourite and should get more attention. When I went to the graffiti school we took everything from the teachers: their way of talking, the music they listened to, we were like sponges.

4. No, it was a bit too hurried. On the whole it was okay, but I should have been more careful.

Björn Almqvist and Malcolm Jacobson



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Stab: "I like to decorate places, not ruin them."

"Graffiti is about copying things"

Helsinki has been called the cleanest city on earth. Tags and pieces are often buffed the same day they are made. Stylistically, Helsinki graffiti is flourishing, despite the harsh climate. One of the most prominent writers is Stab. UP went to Helsinki to have a talk with a well-spoken writer, aware of his traditions.

Stab: "I'm not expressing anger when I tag. I like places that are bombed."

I meet Stab on a cold and crisp autumn day outside the main entrance of Helsinki's largest department store. We take a walk through town to find a place to talk undisturbed. It is lunchtime, and the streets are filled with people. The Finnish capital is characterized by urban architecture: buildings are tall and thin, but also quite dour. Helsinki keeps a close watch over its inhabitants. Streets and houses are well maintained, and there are hardly any illegal posters or tags anywhere.

Aged between 20 and 30, Stab is a friendly sort who gives an impression of briskness and awareness. He talks a lot. He is dressed in typical street fashion: backpack, simple classical sneakers, hooded jacket and anorak, and comfortable pants. He is dressed as most young people, yet something still marks him as a writer.

During our walk, Stab talks about the Finnish justice system and how it works. Or rather, how it ought not to work. He relates how writers have been sentenced for series of pieces without a shred of evidence. A zero tolerance policy has been maintained in large parts of Scandinavia, against graffiti amongst other things, but while it is waning in Stockholm, in Helsinki it is enforced to its most extreme degree.

"It's important that there should be ambassadors for graffiti," says Stab, "people who are prepared to go out in public and present another image than the one being fed through the media."

"I stayed with Ruskig in Malmö [in southern Sweden] two years ago, and I am very impressed by what he does: lectures, workshops in schools, debates. There's no-one like that in Finland at all."

We enter a dark bar and sit in a corner. While Stab awaits his breakfast sandwich we continue our discussion.

Stab – Copenhagen, Denmark, 2002

Stab – Copenhagen, Denmark, 2002

Meta, Edge, Skip, Teck – Helsinki, 1999

"I'm surprised you wanted to interview me," says Stab. "There are many other writers who do much more than me. This year I've done very little. I've never sent many photos to graffiti magazines, because those who are bigger than me don't, so if a picture of mine gets printed everyone will think I'm the king of Helsinki."

Stab tells me he spent some time in Copenhagen, the capital city of Denmark, in 2002.

What was it like to write in Copenhagen?

"It was a great feeling to see my pieces moving on the trains. I did a wholecar that lasted for a week. After Helsinki, it really felt tolerant. And a lot bigger! People in Copenhagen mind their own business. You can even sit on the train and smoke a joint without anyone reacting. In Helsinki, the first reaction is always to call the police."

"Style is such a personal thing."

How does graffiti in Helsinki manage to keep its humor and elegant style despite frequent buffing and tough sanctions?

"I don't know. The style is probably not that dependent on the environment, apart perhaps from its speed. Style is such a personal thing. Here, it is inherited from the elders, like Mer, Miro, Trama and those who used to write in the early 1990s. They paved the way and were a good basis for the Helsinki style. But it's difficult to see good stuff on the streets now."

"I think younger writers take a lot of stuff from graffiti magazines. There's less Helsinki in the style now, perhaps Europe is more of an influence. I think there is a lack of influence from those that are good. But there are also those who are really into style, which is nice to see. Earlier, the most up writers were also the best. It's always been important to do good style. At least, my friends have been quite strict about style."

Which names do you use?

"I change names about once a year. It would be nice to keep the same name, but it can be good not to become too famous."

Stab grew up in a well-to-do suburb of Helsinki. He describes his home environment as "extremely normal". He first encountered graffiti through an older guy who lived in his building and used to write in the late 1980s. Stab himself did not start writing until high school.

After high school, he has been studying, a course that he has yet to complete after five years.

"Periodically, I get tired of studying. Lately I haven't been to school that much. I work when I need money, but try not to work too much. It's okay not to do anything at all," says Stab with satisfaction. "This year I slowed down and only made like 15 pieces so far."

The reason he has not been writing much lately is that the situation in Helsinki is tough, with quick turnaround of cleaning and guards that hunt graffiti writers.

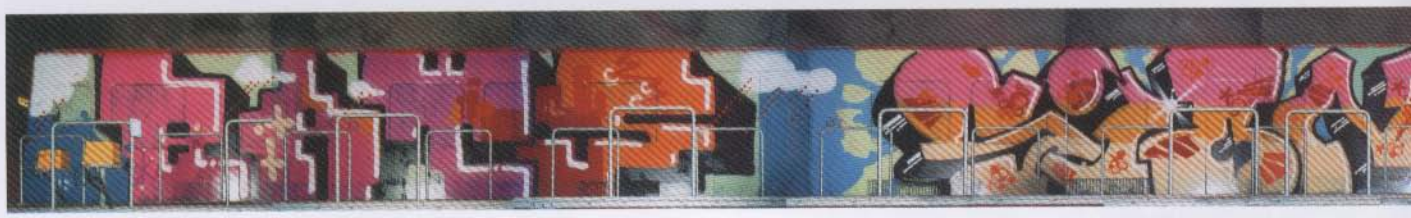
"But I miss writing. It's the best way to pass the time."

Where do you actually write, since the buffing patrols in Helsinki remove graffiti in just a day?

"You have to find your own places. There are some deserted walls that are not getting buffed. Or you go out into the middle of the woods. Those places are not very good, but there are very few places you can go. You have to find them, and they're hard to get to, and maybe that's why they don't get buffed."

How do you live up to being a writer?

"You can be a writer in really many ways. You need an understanding for the culture, to know what it's all about. I consider myself a writer, although I never lived the life as some people consider it to be true."



Bats, Zion, Roach, Funky – Helsinki Subway, 2003

Jay, Meta – Helsinki, 2002

Finnish graffiti has played an important part in Scandinavia, but at the same time few know what's really going on. There is no regularly published dedicated magazine, and tough sanctions have led to a situation where many writers would rather not speak about what they do.

Of course I am curious to hear about the graffiti scene.

"Everybody is just waiting for the next depression, for the city to run out of money, for things to get better again. The city is really broke. They're cutting down on everything. They're cutting childcare benefits, they close mental institutions and the patients are left on the street. All they seem to spend money on in new shopping malls."

As part of the zero tolerance policy, a huge propaganda campaign, is fed by the media to the public. Graffiti writers are usually decried as hardened criminals and dangerous individuals capable of anything.

I ask Stab how he is affected by society's attitude to graffiti.

"It could be important to see what people think about graffiti. Graffiti fits perfectly in urban environments, the ordinary guy would like it, but the city is putting it down so much. I could do a piece that people would like, it's good for the environment, but that's not the main point."

Stab thinks a lot about where tags are placed and how they look:

"I like to decorate places, not ruin them. But someone could see it as ruining them anyway. I'm not expressing anger when I tag. I like places that are bombed."

"I like the esthetics. They fit in an urban environment. Tags should be there. It's a part of the city, or at least my interpretation of an urban environment."

Is it important that people like your pieces?

"In a way it's important. The most important thing is that I like it myself. I do my pieces for others to look at, 'cause they're done in public places, but still ..."

Stab goes quiet, and thinks for a while, pensively stroking his chin.

"It's a problem with graffiti, you do it in public places, but still most writers are their own worst critics."

Stab says he now knows what he wants with his style and no longer wonders too much about what other writers think of his pieces. Feedback is good, he says, but usually not many people will see the piece.

How would you define your style?

"The inspiration of graf is the limitations."

"It changes. It's been the same for like a year now, but it's hard to describe. I don't think I've found my style yet. I like solid letters, and no big holes in them."

How do you do your letters?

"It depends on the mood, the type of piece, and if I have enough cans. The faster I do them, the better they get. Panels have been the best pieces I've done. I hardly ever use a sketch. I paint the first letter, then the next has to adapt to it, and so on. What has influenced my styles most are fatcaps and spray paint with high pressure. My technique has never been so good, and it's okay to be messy with that."

What is good style?

"Control. It's a difficult question, because some toy pieces are good too. I have a very strict way of looking at what makes good graffiti, and what's going wrong. But it has to have some flow, and relations to the roots, the origins of graf."

You mean New York?

"Yes."

Why are you so good?

"My influences are so good!"

Yase, Stab, Ner – Copenhagen, Denmark, 2002

Stab, Skip – Helsinki, 2002

Are there details you've stolen from your influences?

"A lot, yeah! I do it almost in every piece. But I try to keep it in the crew so I don't get my ass kicked. And it goes back again. When I see somebody's taking it back from me, I don't feel so bad. Graf is always about copying things. It's full of it. The inspiration of graf is the limitations. You have to use them, but still you can do endless variations. It's impossible to copy a piece, because you can see the handwriting of the guy that did it. I know that because I tried to make someone else's piece like he made it, but in the end it looked like I did it."

What is biting? Are there limits?

"It depends so much. Too much is too much. You can usually see it."

Tobias Barenthin Lindblad

Stab – Copenhagen, Denmark, 2002

Meta – Helsinki, 2001

Stab...

...Yase – Estonia, 2001

manhattan

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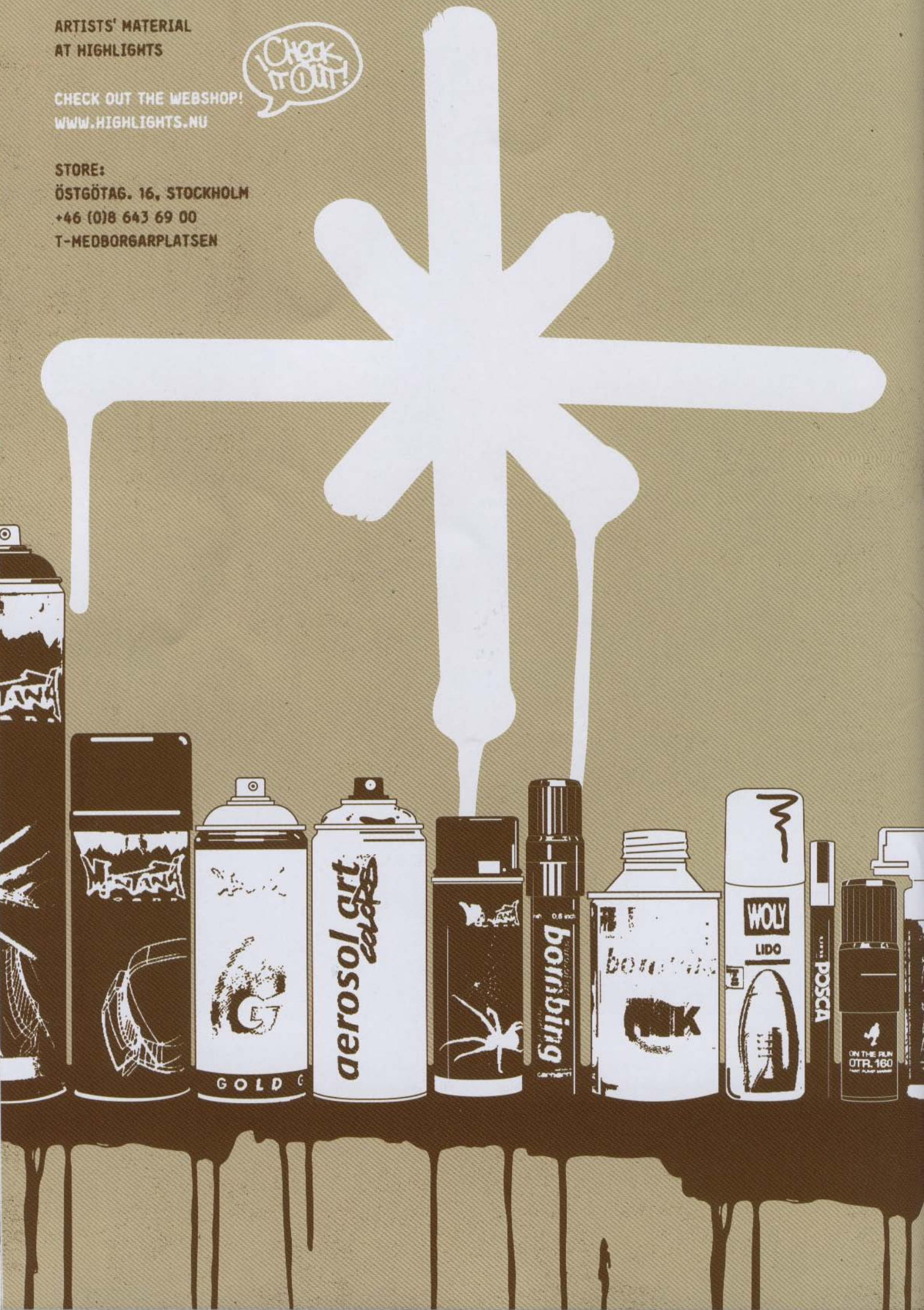

Skip: "I'm not hardcore, it's just that a piece fits so well on a train. There is an aggression in train pieces and illegal writing that I like."

An impression of power

Skip has never had the ambition to be the most profilic writer but we consider him a king of style. He follows the Finnish style tradition of stretching the limits.

"The first time I drew a line with a spray can I was in third grade. I was ten years old. A classmate got me to start. We bought some cans and went out doing tags on the walls in our area. I wrote Skip or Skipper. We were close to getting caught. Before I had only seen some tags not really knowing what it was about."

Skip comes from Helsinki, the Finnish capital. He has been an active graffiti writer for more than ten years.

"It took a while before I started writing seriously. I sketched, did some tags and was interested in graffiti, but it was only in 1991, when I met some others who were also into graffiti, that my writing really got going. We formed one of the crews I'm in, TPC."

Skip gives a calm and collected impression. He drinks a cup of coffee and smokes a cigarette while saying that he hasn't done much writing in the last year. He's had other things than graffiti on his mind.

"I haven't really had time to write. I've done a few pieces, maybe five or six. But it's not like I'm going to quit."

He speaks English well, with a wide vocabulary and typical Finnish accent.

What do you do otherwise?

"Right now I'm working. But I'd like to get into some advertising or art school. I think I could use my knowledge of graffiti in those fields. The construction is the same. Graffiti is an egoistic act. It's about marketing yourself. This is also true in advertising, for instance."

Does graffiti writing affect your life otherwise?

"All the time. But only in good ways. Sure, I've been caught for illegal graffiti-writing, but the fines weren't so bad and it hasn't really landed me in trouble."

Signing a black book.

Skip explains that graffiti has taught him to look at art in a certain way. With graffiti as a starting-point.

"I look at things as how they would work graffiti-wise."

How have your friends and family reacted to your writing?

"My parents never liked my writing graffiti. They threw my cans out and I used to sneak out to write. I've never been able to talk about my writing openly. They don't like it. Now, lately, they've started to see that something good may come of it. My father thinks that if graffiti gets me into art school, it's achieved something good."

Skip says that almost all his friends have some connection to graffiti. His graffiti-writing is no secret.

"I've never needed to discuss my writing that much. I like to talk about graffiti and so do my friends, but we don't often discuss the act of writing itself. We come from similar backgrounds and have the same interests: getting wasted and writing graffiti."

Later that evening I meet up with Skip again, who is accompanied by some friends from his crews TPC and CDC.

The destination tonight is a hip-hop club. Before setting off, we sit in

The Paint Cipher – Helsinki, 2000

a small place in what is a calm and quiet area for Helsinki on a Friday night. The room is filled to bursting with all kinds of debris, magazines and furniture. There are, amongst other things, pictures of graffiti artists and train writers from Stockholm that can be dated back to the early 90s. Most of the pictures originate in the close collaboration that existed between Finnish writers like Hiv, Main and Nois and the Swedish crew Vim. Nois, who is with us this evening, is talking happily about the old pictures. Skip doesn't say much. He seems to play a more reserved part.

"Graffiti makes me feel like a teenager."

You've been writing for more than ten years, and you're no longer a teenager. Do you ever think where this is going?

"I don't see any problem with my writing. It's such a great part of my life. I don't think there's an age limit for graffiti."

Skip says that illegal painting holds the greatest fascination for him.

"It makes me feel like a teenager. It's saying, 'I'm the boss'. You decide to write in one place and you don't ask for permission. It's a rebellious attitude I like. You take your place, you change the world if you like."

Skip says he has never had the ambition to be the most profilic writer, to be the king. You get the impression that he doesn't care much about other writers' opinions and criticism.

"Yes, I care what others think of my pieces. I have opinions about other people's pieces, and I'd like to be respected by the ones I respect. I write for others, so that others can see it. I want to write enough to show that I'm still here. Then, if someone has doubts, it doesn't matter that much. I know I'm writing myself and I'll go on doing it."

Is criticism from society important?

"It's only bad. I'd like to show that there is beauty in graffiti. That even if it is done illegally, there is still beauty in it. Illegality doesn't exclude beauty."

According to Skip, all people would really like to do a graffiti piece, they just don't know it. If they understood, they'd feel the urge.

"It's a childish urge, a child doesn't care what it paints, it just paints."

He also says that he believes there is hope for graffiti.

"Nowadays, more people understand graffiti. Especially the younger. The world we live in is increasingly affected by graffiti; advertising especially bears clear signs of graffiti influence. Graffiti is the perfect training ground for 'public visual communication'. I think there is hope for graffiti. The generation growing up now understands it more. And the more who understand it, the better. In the future, people in general will have a better understanding for graffiti. You see that graffiti is still there and accept it."

For a Swede or other outsider, Skip's pieces could be seen as examples of an undefined Finnish style. Skip partly agrees.

"I don't think that my style is typically Finnish, but possibly it has

Skip, Meta – Helsinki, 2000

Skip – Helsinki, 2001

similarities with my friends'. We use the same elements. I do think my style follows a Finnish tradition through constant development. It's about stretching the limits."

How would you describe your style?

"I try to develop it all the time. I like classical graffiti, like the one in New York in the 70s. The outlines should be black and clear. That's what I'm trying to do, but I try to add my touch to the whole thing. I can't really say what denotes my style, you should ask someone else. But I think it's important that there is movement in the piece. That's something I strive for. That the piece is on its way."

"Illegality doesn't exclude beauty."

Skip says that he is influenced by other writers, and other graffiti. But also by everything else he sees.

Skip..

..D.Ce..

"I try to transform all the impressions I get and apply them to my graffiti. I might have an idea about a letter or part of a letter. Then I start from that and try to get the rest of the letters to work with it. Now I mostly work with fairly simple and quick pieces. That's because reality is what it is. There isn't time to paint for very long."

He says he sketches a lot. Tries new ideas and styles, and develops them.

"It takes time to get a piece the way you want it. Only some of my pieces really show how I think a graffiti piece should look. I think it's important that you see that there is a thought behind a piece. There should be a vision, a goal with the piece. That's what denotes a good style."

Later Skip produces a number of photos of pieces he has done. It is hard for him to decide whether he wants them published or not. After looking through the selection that has been made for UP, he explains that he is parting with some of them with a heavy heart. "They mean a lot to me," he says. Most of the ones he shows are pieces done on trains. And trains are what he likes writing on most.

"At first me and Jaytek started hitting the train insides on a daily routine based action. Then in 1992 when there was a big train boom I did my first trainpieces, fast backjumps. I started writing on trains and got stuck on it. I think there is something special about writing on trains. I'm not hardcore, though, it's just that a piece fits so well on a train. It's the feeling. If I have a choice, I'll definitely choose to write on a train

..Stab – Helsinki, 2001

Skip – Helsinki, 2001

rather than a wall. I always feel the urge to write on trains. There is an aggression in train pieces and illegal writing that I like. Legal pieces lack that entirely."

He says he prefers to write with his friends, but is more satisfied after writing on his own.

"I think it's better to write when there are, say, two of you, because then you have four eyes and ears. But if I write alone it feels better. It feels as if I have the power, I am the boss. I have decided and implemented the action. Nobody can deny that."

Torkel Sjöstrand

Skip – Helsinki, 2001

Skip – Helsinki, 1998

Skip – Helsinki, 1998

Tek, Yase, Meta, Zkip – Helsinki, 2001

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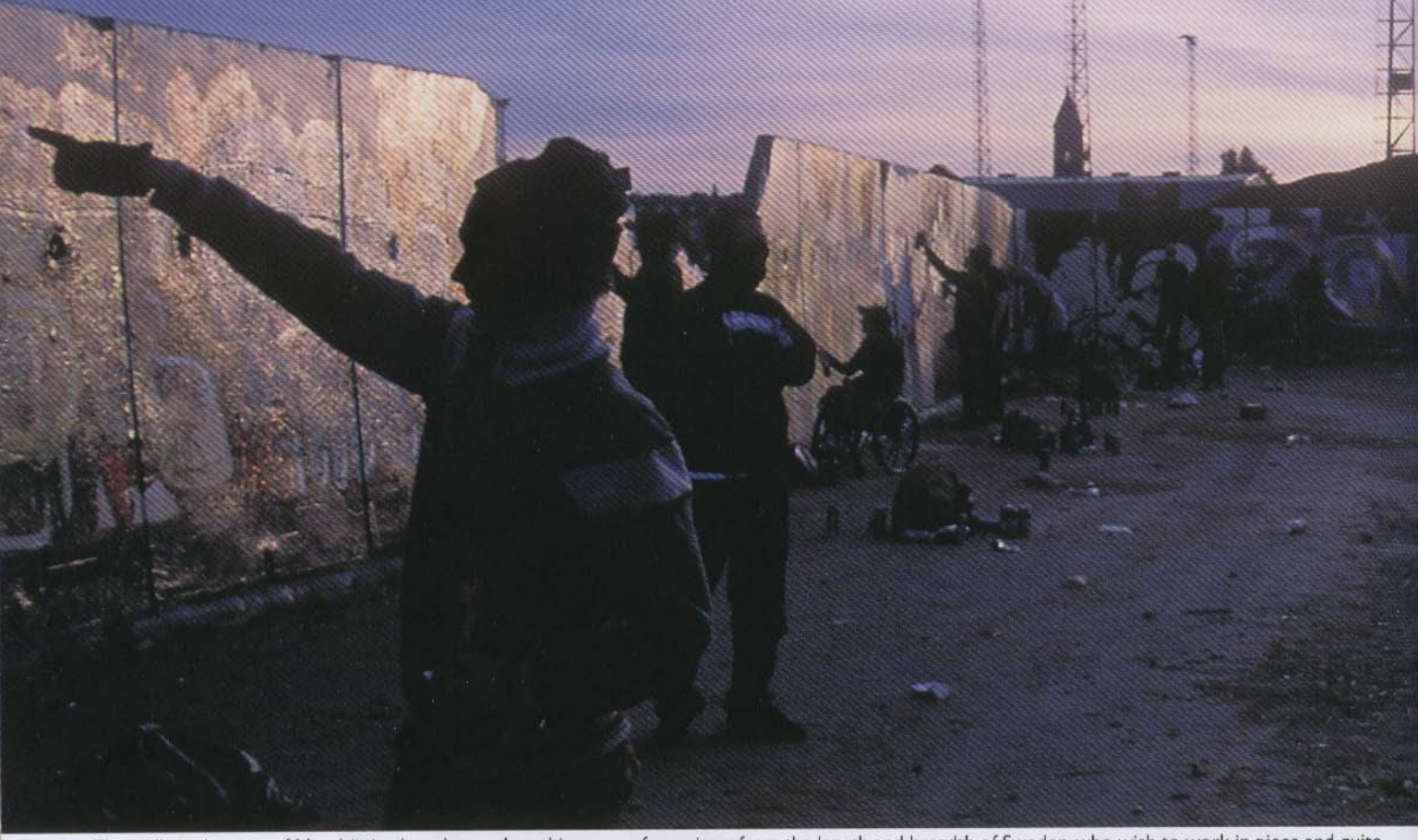


The walls in the port of Norrköping have been a breathing-space for writers from the length and breadth of Sweden, who wish to work in piece and quite.

Relaxed anniversary in Norrköping

There are few legal venues to write graffiti in Sweden. One great exception is the Norrköping coal port, with several hundred square feet worth of free walls where anyone may paint, anywhere, any time. Saturday September 6 th was its tenth anniversary.

The walls in the port of Norrköping have been a breathing-space for writers from the length and breadth of Sweden, who wish to work in piece and quite on their pieces. The dominant view held in Sweden is that graffiti is an illegal act to be punished. Norrköping has chosen a different policy, and cites these legal walls as the reason that far fewer graffiti-related crimes are reported there than in the only slightly larger sister town, Linköping.

The organizers Europaväg 4 had arranged for a grand family party, with a sound system and more than 40 writers. In the event, it may not have turned into much of a family party, but there were far more than 40 people writing ... It was impossible to tell exactly how many there were, but I would guess at 150. This meant that the tenth anniversary was the biggest graffiti event ever to be held in Sweden, at least measured in terms of the number of writers.

"There aren't many young people writing," observes my 13-year old companion Oscar as we walk around the area.

No, there aren't. When I started writing graffiti more than fifteen years ago, the older writers were a few years older than me, and of course still are. But then I was 15 and they were just shy of 20; now I am 31 and they are about 35. In Norrköping, the youngest writers are just under 20. Even though there are several teenagers in the audience, graffiti is clearly no longer a pure form of youth culture.

The drawback with holding a jam in the port is that audience interaction never really develops, even though onlookers outnumber writers by far. The area is so large that nothing comes into focus. Everywhere are people writing while others look on; in one location is a sound system pumping fat beats, to which various rappers occasionally have a go in front of an indolent audience sitting in a circle. However, this lack of focus also allows for a modest and relaxed atmosphere.

Some graffiti enthusiasts are critical to legal walls. They say that places like the Norrköping coal port become reservations in which graffiti is hidden, and loses its appeal to those who are not among the converted. But if this is a reservation, it's a very nice one.

Jacob Kimvall

Rider

Ellr

Sarek, Whok, Saht, Dance, Woman, Jama

Estik, Ance

The Västerås wall part 1: unknown, Pasha, Shit, Mat, Out, Boost, Puppet.

The Västerås wall part 2: Jeis, Suer, Näu, Dr Död, Side, Arom.

The Highlights wall part 1: Ikaroz, One, Dirte, Ape, Kropp, Skill, Kaos, Uze, Ians.

The Highlights wall part 2: Finsta, Sken, character by Ape, Rail, Cake, character by Ikaroz, Dne, Tuna, characters by Moer.

The Norrköping wall part 1: Iche, Inter, Afrika, Häms, Paper, Dizel.

The Norrköping wall prt 2:Sate, Phan, Awone, Voyer, Moat, Snr, Mander/Tisse Tee, Rabbit Boy.

Lady: "It's easy to interpret the word 'attitude' as a negative one. For me, it's a matter of perspective and consciousness." The canvas Lady won his first battle at Valand with.

"It's about commitment"

Why is attitude important in graffiti? UP met Lady, who lives in Gothenburg, to have a discussion about attitude, styles and Hip Hop.

On a windy October evening, I meet Lady outside Valand, one of Sweden's art schools located in Gothenburg. Education at the art schools is much sought-after and it is hard to get in.

Lady cultivates a varied style of dress, featuring both hip-hop (hooded jacket, sneakers) and art school (overgrown Mohican). We enter one of the studios, where Lady's working partner Kerstin serves up some punch.

Whilst I look at Lady's paintings, another few people drop by. We chit-chat while Lady straightens some mess and hangs a canvas in the choice spot of the studio.

"That's the one I won with," he says with satisfaction.

When he has finished and has drunk a glass of punch, he suggests that we go and find a place to sit undisturbed.

Lady is in his mid-20s and has written graffiti since 1990. He grew up in the Dalarna area of central Sweden, and eventually moved to Stockholm to go to art school. He has lived in Gothenburg for just one year.

Lady lights some candles and puts on some music. We sink into some couches.

Are you a student at Valand?

"No, I'm here to challenge the students. Kerstin, who attends the school, invited me for a battle. She wanted to challenge me, and then do a report about it. This spring I was with a friend at the Valand exhibition, and talked rather loudly about us doing better stuff. Kerstin overheard me. She arranged for me to get keys and a pass in a month. I plan to stay here until next spring exhibition and beat everybody. I want to battle a student a week so I can hang on at Valand."

Lady battles art school students, but not only in graffiti style.

"I've challenged a girl now who's got a cool style, she's been to Kokkola [a Finnish art school] and has had Ruskig, among others as a guest lecturer there. That may be a hard match. With Kerstin it felt easy. I was sure I would win, and I had her beaten in a week. She was a good loser. She said it felt good to force herself to perform a task."

The lockers at Valand art school.

Who names the winner?

"The general public, we thought. In this case I won on a walkover. I want to bring the hip-hop attitude to something completely new. You've got to have street knowledge, be streetwise. You should pick people right off the street you think would like your work. It's a challenge. Would he or she like my stuff more? They get to watch, judge the art and vote. The challenger decides how long the battle should be and which technique to use."

Isn't it problematic to battle in different styles?

"It's a challenge! Many battles start from the wrong perspective. If I were a technical writer battling a bomber, I'd say: 'You have to do this in wildstyle!' As an artist, I think you should know different styles."

Lady, Enya – Gothenburg 2003.

Lady 2003.

Lady 2003.

"Kerstin and I are going to exhibit our battle pieces, and I want everybody I have battled to participate in the exhibition, that way everybody battles everybody else. Many might not like the idea of competing, but that's chicken. You should be able to say what you think about other people's stuff, but still be humble."

"There are different ways of tackling someone being sassy, of battling someone. I had a battle with some kids here. It was a crew who would go over some pieces. I went over six of their pieces with throw-ups. They've stopped writing now, or changed their names."

Shouldn't you have gone over them with pieces instead of destroying their work?

"I just wanted to destroy as much as possible as quickly as possible. A throw-up is more degrading. Of course it's okay to go over a lesser piece with something cooler."

What is the purpose of the Valand battle?

"To stoke some fire in people who have a little trouble getting to grips with things, myself among others. Also, pressure to succeed is high in schools, especially during the first semesters. The battle is a bit of a work-in-progress for me too. With it, I can seek attention at the higher art schools. The graffiti attitude that 'I am the best' causes trouble, but it also contributes to some good stuff. In an art school you become someone. As a writer, you are someone as soon as you do something in public."

Lady now addresses the state of Swedish graffiti today, a question of importance to him. He leans forward in his seat and gesticulates.

"Graffiti culture has completely halted today. Many people go around writing a lot instead of writing well. Of course, it's kind of hard writing on trains, and you have to be quick. But there are other places to write. Nowadays, you can become the greatest in a year or so without really knowing how to write."

But you said that that was the good thing about graffiti – that you can be someone as soon as you've done something?

"I'm a bit conservative when it comes to graffiti."

"Hmmm. It's a tough question. I'm divided – the action is important, but it's not always pretty. Which is why I dis people, not just for the hell of it, but to get people to do better pieces."

I met Lady this summer, when he was doing a wall in Gothenburg. We stood in the warm sun, each drinking a beer and talking graffiti. Then he said that if a writer doesn't give every piece everything, he shouldn't be doing graffiti.

What do you mean by that?

"I want to try to transcend myself every time. When I write, I want to do something new, something I couldn't do. Especially with legal pieces. Graffiti is about commitment."

What other writers do you think invest in their pieces?

"Ikaroz. I think he's one of the world's best writers. Ruskig is on fire too. And Maes. They are playful and have a pretty relaxed attitude, but they have the natural talent, so what they do is very good. They are writers I know, I can't judge the others."

During the summer and the autumn, I have heard loose rumors about Lady. Much is being said about his attitude and less about his pieces. It is said that he disses other writers and claims to be the best in Sweden. Rumors are rumors, and are often exaggerated, but the more I hear of his supposed attitude, the more curious I get. What is the truth? What does the man want?

Do you have any role models when it comes to attitude?

"Cap, actually. His attitude to writing was admirable, and this attitude may well be the essence of graffiti. He knew what he was doing and stood for it. It's an important attitude. But his destructions of other people's pieces went overboard, and that's nothing I defend."

Lady sits fingering an almost-empty beer can. On the table in front of him are several empties.

"NG [a Swedish crew]. They may not be models, but they have been a source of inspiration to me. Their crew is one of the few that actually

Lady 2003.

still measures up, though they may say different. Disey and Ziggy still have the glow and the attitude; I think they're the best. Reson, with his bombing attitude, is a model too."

Do you realize that you provoke other writers with your pronouncements?

"Yeah, I do. It should. Hell, they're graffiti writers, right?"

Lady gets more upset.

"If you're a graffiti writer, it's your responsibility to reply to the graffiti. I didn't start writing 'cause it was cool. Well, maybe a bit. You do partly, but that vanishes with age. There has to be a commitment."

How does attitude relate with graffiti?

"It's part of it. You become somebody, you get self-confidence when you start to write. You take part in a social circle, you live and breathe graffiti. I think one should be humble and loyal but still have balls. To be arrogant, but still be able to communicate. It's easy to interpret the word 'attitude' as a negative one. For me, it's a matter of perspective and consciousness. Not just being sassy and stupid, like some people might think."

Is it worth it if your pronouncements hurt people?

"No, it's a problem I've had for a long time. I find it hard to empathize with people. I can make a comment and not understand how hard they think it sounds."

Do you think people want to know what you think about their pieces?

"In many cases they either don't want to or don't need to know. It just comes out of my mouth. I can't stop it. But I also want to provoke them. I want to know if they'll stand up for what they do, if they know what they're doing. I take graffiti very seriously."

Many Gothenburg writers are quite young. Most of them seem to know each other, and from the outside, the graffiti scene seems pleasant and friendly. Conflicts aren't visible in the same way as in other cities.

"The scene is smaller here, almost everybody knows each other. It's very intimate, and you have to keep on good terms. It's okay to be sassy, as long as people know who you are, and you'll still get taken seriously. I've been writing for 13 years, and I think I can say that I'm one of the best and most experienced active writers in Gothenburg. Hopefully, my friends can accept my being honest. I know I hurt people sometimes, but I have had comebacks. They call me the art critic."

"Graffiti culture has cornpletely halted today."

"What I say compels people to do better. To take graffiti seriously and learn to write from the basics. Graffiti has its principles, and once you know them you can break them."

What is the most important thing about graffiti?

"To be conscious!"

In what way?

"You should be aware of the consequences of your actions, aware of history. As eighth-generation writers, that might be hard, but if you're part of the third or fourth, you should know the whole thing, 'the Spraykonst rules', kings and toys and all that. What's in the books Spraykonst

Fame, Qiter, Lady, Cakes – Gothenburg 2003.

Character by Finsta, Lady – Gothenburg 2003.

Meo, character by Frisbe, Lady – Gothenburg 2003.

Lady 2003.

and Spraycan Art – that's how it used to be! I don't stand for everything, but you need some of it. I'm a bit conservative when it comes to graffiti. I respect those who've done it longer than me. They're older, they're the best! Aman, Kaos, Nug, Dudez, Zappo, Cazter, Cascade. They know what they're doing!"

Lady gets another beer. In the next room, two girls are talking. Outside in the stairwell, steps echo under the high ceiling when someone passes. Apart from that, it is silent. It is deserted, as deserted as an autumn night in a night-abandoned school can be.

Do you notice the Jante rules (a set of guidelines defining humble behavior originating in Norway)?

"Yeah!" Lady giggles. "You can tell we live in Sweden. There's too much cowardice. In everything: in graffiti, in art. It's spineless. The art school teachers are treated like gods. That's all wrong. It should all be about the students. It's hard to do a battle project in Sweden, because confrontation is thought of as unpleasant and people aren't used to it. They need softening up!"

Tobias Barenthin Lindblad

Mander: "Malmö is the world's best city to visit in the summer. Everyone who walks past the parking building is positive to writing. I took it very easy: hung out and talked to people."

Rusty writers on the road

No energy for writing after work? No possibilities to paint legally? Why don't you go on a graffiti-tour?

They come from two different graffiti generations and have completely different styles. All four work in similar jobs as illustrators and graphic designers. But two of them are beginning their careers, and the other two are about to quit. Last summer, the old graffiti hounds Core and Skize squeezed into a car with Mander and Finsta and went off on a writing tour that started in Norrköping and ended a week later in Copenhagen.

Both Core and Skize had interrupted their graffiti writing for some time. The previous summer, they did a piece each. But they soon realized it would take more than that to retrieve the old 80s technique.

"I'd stopped for ten years. The reason for this is that work got the upper hand. Now it's all in a day's work to make illustrations on commission. The whole joy of creativity has evaporated. I wanted to find what gives true creative joy again, and the last time I'd experienced it was writing on a wall. Core and I had been talking about getting started. So we took a week to get rid of the rust on our spraying technique," says Skize.

Mander and Finsta, who are a few years younger, haven't known interruptions of that length. Both still walk around with pens in their pockets. But since Finsta moved to Stockholm to study at an art school,

Norrköping - Finsta, Skize, Core, Mander.

Gothenburg - Finsta, Lady, Skize, Smuts, Mander, Troy Core, Onde.

Skize: "Norrköping is good but Röda Sten is probably the best wall. There's a cafeteria and a walking-path next to it, so a lot of people watch. There are good vibes about the whole place. In Norrköping, the walls are good, but the environment isn't as soft." **Core**: "In Gothenburg, I only drew a spider. The rest of the time, I stood on a barrel writing some text on top.

Copenhagen – Meeting of Styles – Core, Skize, Mander, Ruskig. **Skize**: "The tour was a success. However, I never fulfilled my ambition to do a real burner. In Copenhagen I was tired and didn't have anything left. I'd brought a sketch I wanted to do, but I couldn't get it on the wall."

he hasn't had time to do thought-out productions.

"I feel I need different parts of graffiti. When you write legally, it's about pushing the limits of what you can do. Illegal stuff like tags is about refining something a lot. Nobody puts that much work into a legal piece. What seems least artistic and most brutal is probably what you have spent the most time on. More demands are placed on a person to do something when it's illegal. It's a greater achievement. But I choose to do both. The results pretty much depend on the atmosphere. I live in Stockholm now, and there are no legal walls here. That's why I haven't had the opportunity to do this type of graffiti in a while."

Though Core and Skize had been removed from spray painting the longest, all four were quite rusty. And at the start in Norrköping, their reputations were put to the test.

"I immediately felt I'd lost all technique," says Mander. "I thought '*shit*, this is embarrassing. I stink next to the others'. I was unused to these new spray cans and couldn't draw a straight line. Then I got stressed out and started making quite a mess. When I was ready, I saw the others were taking it much easier. Skize had just finished sketching up."

"I had big ambitions and had brought some pretty advanced sketches," says Skize. "When we arrived in Norrköping, I let rip with one of the tougher sketches. But I never had time to finish. Since I hadn't been writing for so long, I had no routine. At the same time, I had high ambitions, having worked as an illustrator all these years. Sketching up was pretty hard and took about 40 minutes. After eight hours, I still wasn't ready. So I just put on some finishing touches so it looked okay."

The time they spent on their pieces was one of the greatest differences between the two generations of writers. Core and Skize spent hours working to achieve perfection.

"We were more fixated on the lines themselves than the totality of the piece," says Skize. "In the 80s, lines and spray technique were so damn

Mander: "Norrköping is always really good. It gets a bit windy sometimes, but this is absolutely the best legal wall in Sweden."

But if you look at the whole, I think Gothenburg was the best. It was more thought through." **Mander**: "We met up with some friends: Lady, Ske and Troy. We'd decided to have a horror motif since Core is into 50s horror movies. This time, I knew it was going to take forever, so I took it real easy. It was much better. Apart from some crazy dude with a pit-bull who came and had a go at us at night, everything was great at Röda Sten."

Malmö - Finsta, Mander, Alma, Ullu, Piano 33, Hotel, Ruskig...

...Core, Skize, Child.

important. You often missed the bigger picture. That was something I was thinking of during the trip, that I had to work more on the feeling of wholeness. Every little detail doesn't have to be so advanced. If I can get the composition right, it'll have more impact. Both Mander and Finsta seem to have more creative joy on location. I'm still stuck in some damn technical quagmire. Mander worked in an easier and somehow happier way. I get jealous when I see how he and Finsta just keep on going while I'm stuck on some detail. I want to get away from it. But you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"I'd like to find a style that is faster to do," says Core. "It's frustrating when it takes a long time. So I'm damned impressed by Finsta when he writes so quickly. It just appears in a second."

During the seven-day tour, five productions were made. They worked for approximately ten hours on each wall. Despite differences in technique, style and speed, they would agree on how to paint the wall in every town they visited. After the Norrköping warm-up, they went to Röda Sten in Gothenburg, where they put together the most coherent production of the trip. Next stop was the Anna parking building in Malmö. There they shared a wall with writers from Ireland, the Czech Republic and Denmark.

How do you feel it worked out, getting the various styles together on the productions?

"I have to say that it worked out so-so. Each of us did his bit, and it's clearly visible. We had different attitudes to it all, so it was hard to get it together to a cohesive whole," says Skize.

"First of all, I don't know if graffiti is that good-looking, anyway," says Finsta. "I can see the beauty in tags, the original form of graffiti. But loud color productions are more to impress. They're not really that esthetic once you start looking at them. Lately, I've been wondering if you can put a lot of work into something without its becoming boring to

Lund - Finsta, Core, Skize. **Core**: "I'm pleased with all the walls except for my contribution in Lund. Skize always sets the goal high. He had brought several color sketches. But where I though he was most fluent was on this great Indian that was almost completely improvised."

do. All the walls we did ended up pretty blotchy. It's a bit ugly, but at the same time quite funny."

You spent a lot of time and money on legal walls that will probably be repainted in a few days. Is it worth it?

"That's where one has got so much damn practice. It's only normal for it to disappear, and that doesn't matter, as long as you get some good photos," argues Core.

"Many people think you're an idiot to spend thousands of crowns on stuff that disappears within a few days. But I don't mind. It gives me such a kick just to stand there painting on a big wall. And once you've been a hardcore writer, which I was in the beginning, after all, you don't live for it to stay forever. I'm happy as long as there is some record of it. But of course, I'd rather things remained for a while," says Skize.

Björn Almqvist

Mander in Lund.

Copenhagen - TSM crew by Finsta, Hefa, Marvel, Alma. **Finsta**: "I hadn't painted with the TSM crew in a while. We came up with an idea and worked hard on it instead of just having fun. If you want to do a clean, cohesive wall, you have to choose those friends you fit best with stylistically, and write together a lot first. By then, the charm may have waned so much that you can't stand to do it. It started getting that way in Copenhagen. It's fun when it's good, but it's boring if it just becomes like a job. Still, we had a good day."

Logo by Finsta.

Finsta in Lund.

Typeface by Core.

Logotype by Mander.

Illustration by Skize.

How did graffiti influence your careers?

Core: I learned to draw through graffiti. It has made my drawing style into what it is today, and I use it when I paint pictures or make an illustration on commission. I paint in a very conceptual way, with a concentration on typefaces, since I'm interested in letters. I've worked at an ad agency for many years, but now I'm going to a school learning to paint cars. Advertising creates strange ideals. It has no value. It accentuates stereotypes in order to make people consume. I want to learn a craft with real equipment and real tools. In my spare time, I design typefaces.

Finsta: I think it's perfect to work with what I do and write graffiti at the same time. Partly I take things from my drawing and put them in my graffiti, and partly I use graffiti stuff in my illustrations. It's all about the same thing: what I do must be visible. Each affects the other equally. When you work with graphic design, you have to be conscious of why you are choosing a certain typeface, and what feeling it is supposed to instill. With graffiti, it's more about pure esthetics, often with no content whatsoever. I use a lot of that esthetic in my graphic design and try to put content into graffiti.

I pretty much decide myself what I'm going to do when I am given a job. I've worked hard to show what I want to do, and I'm doing what I want to work with, even when I don't have a job. To be driven by myself and to work hard with no financial gain is something I largely got from graffiti, and it's been a lot of use to me.

Mander: Everything I do emanates from graffiti in some way. That's where we learned to help ourselves and to compete. You learn to do clean, clearly visible stuff. But far from all good graffiti writers become good designers. You have to dare to remove yourself from graffiti too. Many writers who are asked to do a logo will do a graffiti logo. That won't work for people who aren't interested, and you can get tired of it.

Skize: Graffiti was clearly crucial. Without it, I'd never have become an illustrator. In high school, I went on a technical course, but quit and followed the esthetic path. I didn't know then that you could make a living out of this. I thought you had to be a recognized artist to get jobs. When I finished art school, I formed a company with some friends and have been working with it since then. Now I try to simplify my working life so that I still have energy and creativity when I get home. This tour was part of my strategy to get the creative juices flowing again.

For more illustrations and pieces, visit these websites: www.core.nu, www.skize.se

Pugh, Yess

STOCKHOLM WALLS

Dedede, Yeeo

Unik

Ire, High

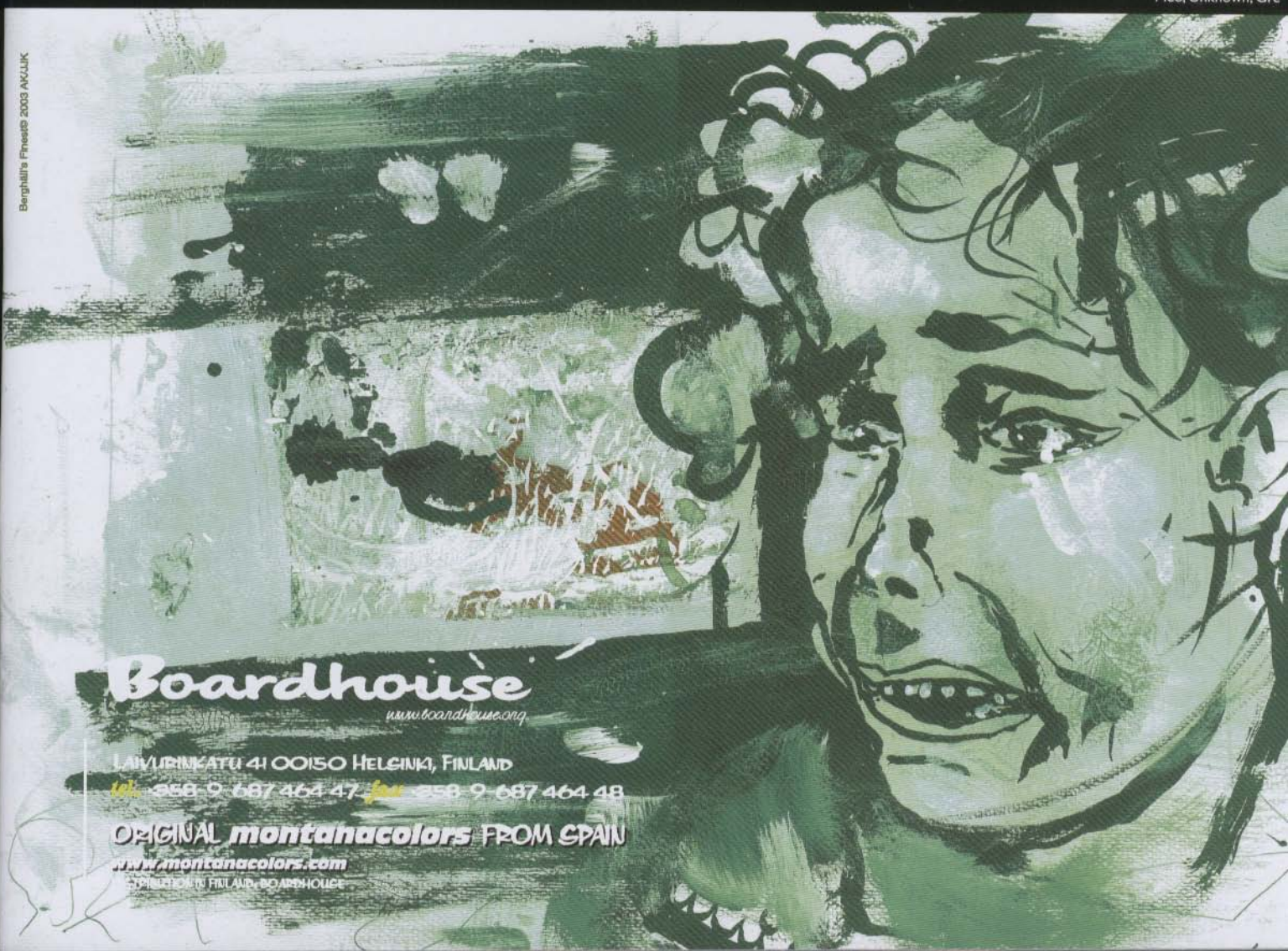
Erse

Siks

Jeks, Gauge, Tele

Kropp

Meo, Unknown, Gre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STOCKHOLM SUBWAY

Dirte, Fame

Tony, Mange

Matad

Oven

Reil

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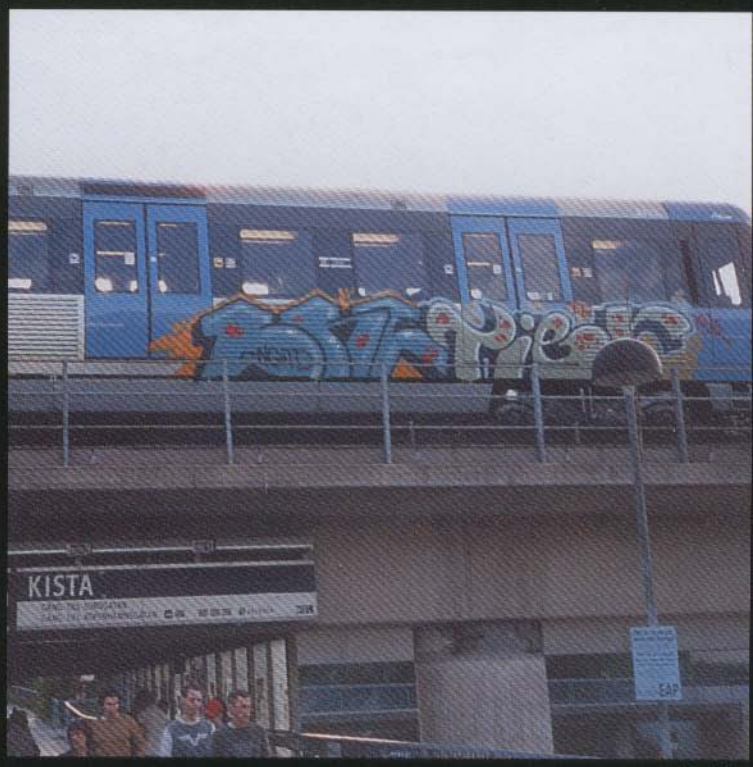


Dne, Tier

Ire, Uze

Matad

Hook

Wufc, Character by Irie

Pms

Oden

Fame crew

Rail, Dirte

STOCKHOLM COMMUTER

Casio, Ribe, Dne, Oven

Dirte, One, Qiter, Characters by Ape and Rail

Oven, Dirte, Vsn

Arom, Relax, Matac

Ellr

Oidor, Fhe

Hank

Rob, Rake

Ner

Siks, Siks

Close

Hook, Ligisd

Hook

Oven, Dne

Sgk, Fame, Flss

Sidekicks

Kids painted in Lund 2003

SCANIA

Rely, Besk

Ofly

Helig

Fem

Chile

Heor, Hools

Fool, Zion

Heor

Cuba..

..Fem

Zion

Fool, Micro, Mako, Ofly, Doer

F--Up, Scuba, 9mm

GOTHENBURG

Igs

Airo

Ink

F-Up, F-Up, Bus

More

Dexie, Rois, Zappa, Diamond

Fire, Soul, Agnes

Qiter

Cake, Mabe, Sgk

Airo

Zeray, Qiter, Fame

Kce

Zeray, Qiter

Kid

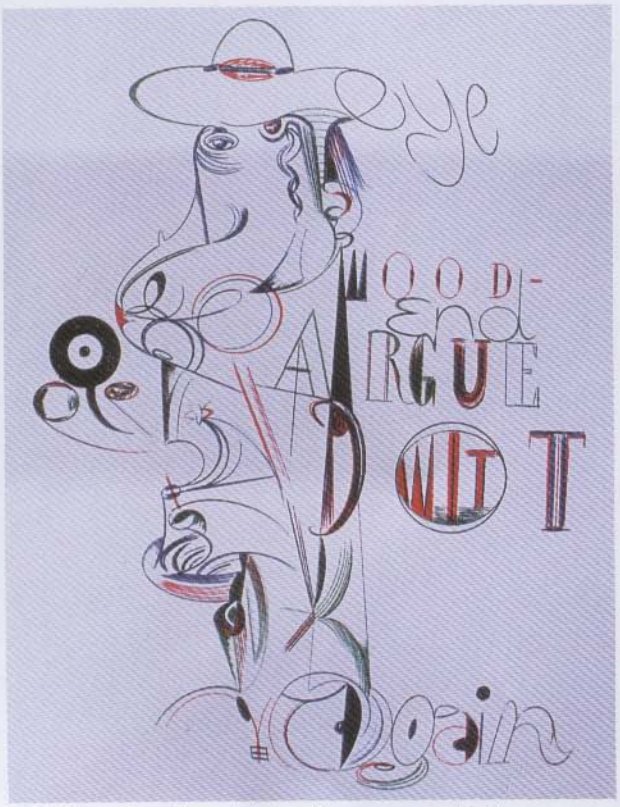
Ser

Akte, Gas

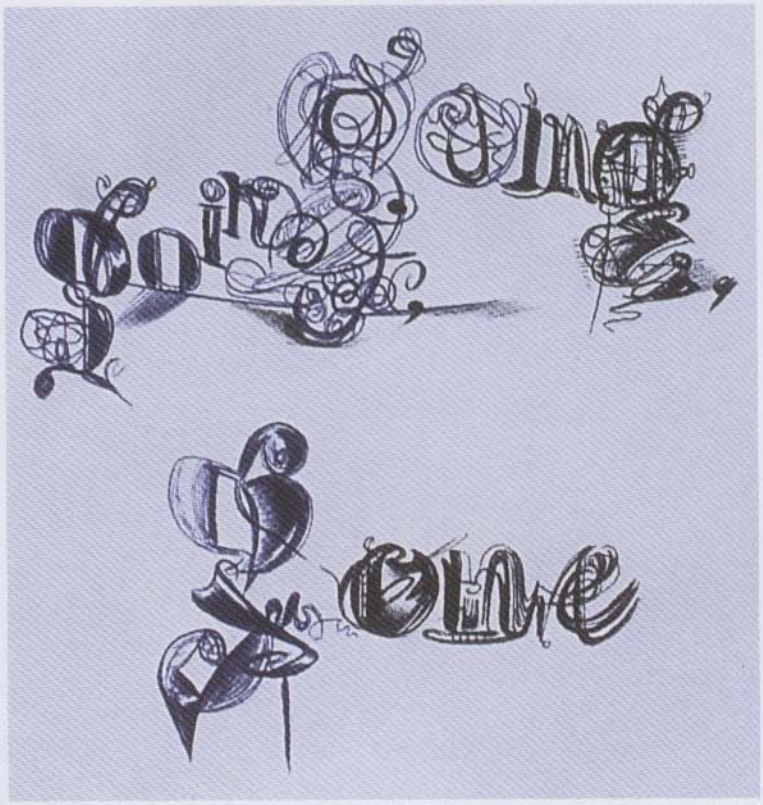
Gud

Winter, Ollio

F-Ups, F-Upr, F-Ups



Ed Fella: "I just play with words, it doesn't have to say something."



Going, going, gone

A King of the Blackbooks

What makes an elderly ex-ad man fill sketchbook after sketchbook with graffiti-like lettering?

Ed Fella is a man in late middle age, with a generous smile and crinkled, twinkling eyes. He talks a lot, eagerly.

Being born in Sweden, where you let people speak until they have finished, I realize I have to interrupt him to get a question in. Ed has been invited to the Stockholm art school Konstfack to teach graphic design and illustration. During his week in Stockholm, he has been managing a project at the school.

I produce a copy of UP and Ed immediately begins to leaf through it. The conversation turns to graffiti. In his book Letters on America, Ed had included a few pictures of tags. He says that though he has never been much interested in tags and graffiti, he might observe them more now. He understands why people in general are not too enchanted with tags:

"They are made on other people's property."

I try to steer the conversation onto what I have come to ask him about. What makes an elderly ex-ad man fill sketchbook after sketchbook with graffiti-like lettering?

"The commercial's gotta stand out, but not be so weird that people don't get it..."

For a great part of your life, you worked in advertising, which has later been placed in public spaces, amongst others. Have you ever felt the urge to write or draw in a public space?

"No, no. Never. Of course, it's a nice feeling to open the Times and see your ad in there, it's like, wow! But I always worked on notebooks, on paper. And besides, I'm from a generation where you weren't supposed to write on walls."

"When I was lecturing in Venice, they wanted five pages out of my notebooks for posters. Then they hung them up and they were all over the city. But mixed in with ad posters. That is the only time I ever did anything on the streets."

You're used to seeing your ads in newspapers and billboards. Was Venice a different feeling?

"It was fun to see the posters. To see people just stand puzzled and looking to try to find out what these posters meant. That's the idea of it, I guess. The commercial's gotta stand out, but not be so weird that people don't get it or don't notice it. It has to be only slightly different. My fliers don't need to be so clear."

Ed has always painted and drawn. For thirty years, he worked as an ad man in his home town Detroit. In 1987, he quit advertising to teach and do commercial – and less commercial – typography, this time on his own terms. As an artist, but with a great fascination for handwritten letters, Ed often refers to folk art in our conversations.

What separates folk art from high art?

"Graffiti, for example, is vernacular art. Graffiti is not from art schools. Vernacular art is amateur art and comes from the people. It comes from the ordinary, even if it ends up extraordinary. Art comes from the idea of the extraordinary. We have our idea of art from the classics."

"Culture constructs art: You can't imagine an abstract painting in the 15th century, society would have said no. But in 1910, the world said yes! Art and society reflect each other. As an artist, you can't work outside society."

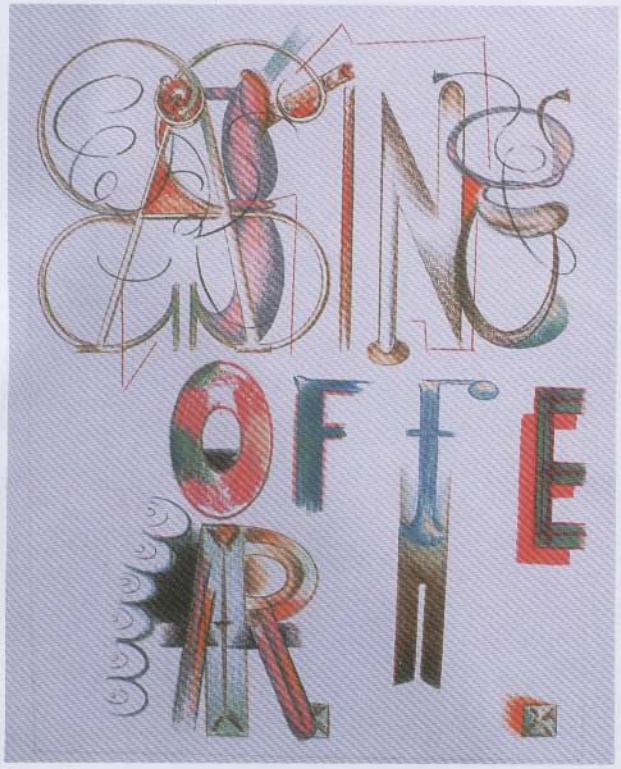
Someone who has done advertising and commercial typography for 35 years has enormous knowledge of design, what its effect is and what it should look like.

Can you measure good design and legibility? Is it the same everywhere?

"That's what you call denotation, the typefaces try to be as readable as possible, which is natural, they gotta work in a fast world. Then you have the connotation, the typefaces which are ornamental, to give a feeling of something. Feelings, emotions, ideas. People want more than legibility, mostly. Advertising is about the tension between functionalism and decoration."

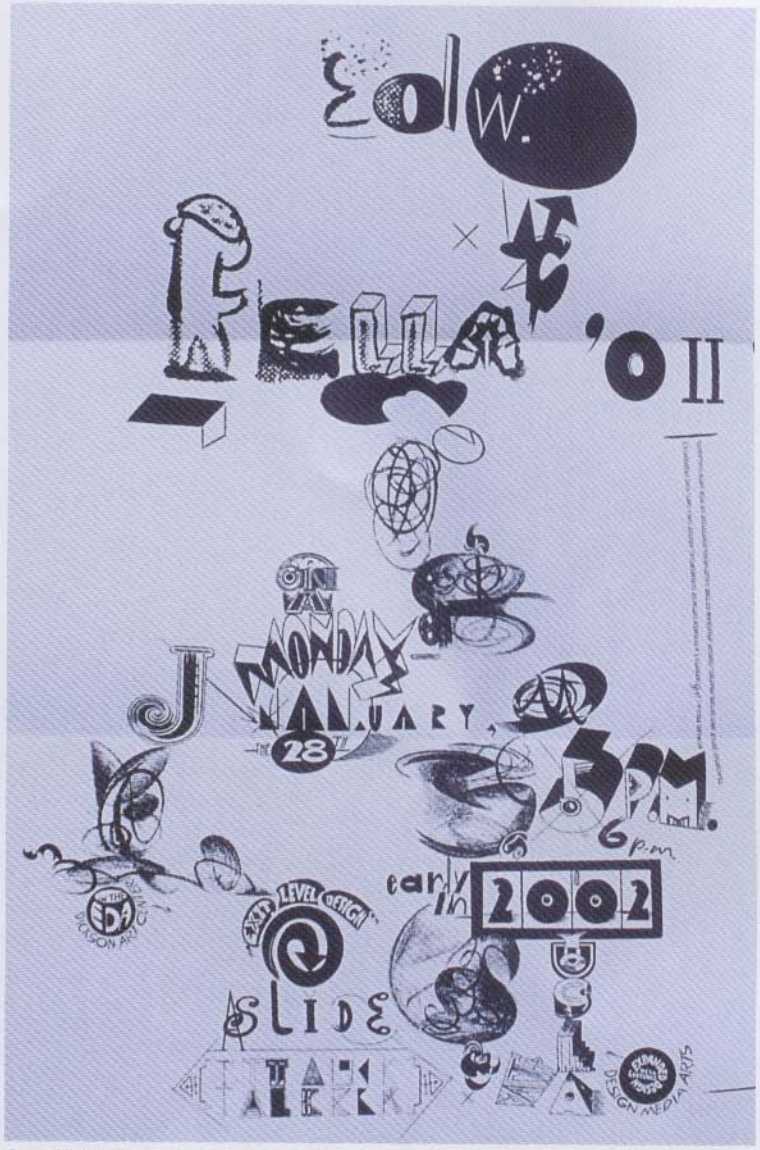
Are there any rules governing how to do good design?

"Yes. Modernist, traditional typography told exactly how it should



Easing offer

Ed Fella in Stockholm.



One of Ed's many fliers.

look. Modernism was an attempt to make universal rules but it failed, in architecture and in design. That was, for example, the idea behind the typeface Helvetica. But this ideal already existed in the classics."

But the rules have disintegrated with postmodernism, which says that rules are not universal, but are perceived differently by different people.

"You know, there are rules, and the rules are flexible, but at some point they are no longer rules."

"You graffiti guys are so narrow."

How do you do your own posters?

"I came up with some original styles. They fit for some, but not all work. It's hard to describe my personal style."

Ed says that when he is commissioned a poster, he lets the client choose: if he gets free reign, he does the job at no cost. Otherwise he gets paid.

Why is there such an interest in lettering today? Is this new?

"Hasn't there always been? But of course, we live in a world with more leisure time. Paint is cheap. Your grandfather wouldn't have had time to paint graffiti, and his father wouldn't even have had the money to buy paint."

Ed produces a pile of sketchbooks, typical writers' sketchbooks and several folders of copies of sketches and fliers he has made. Many of the letterforms look similar to graffiti lettering.

"I've made these notebooks since 1975. I have about 80 of them."

What you do in your books, is that folk or high art?

"Commercial art is kind of vernacular, but I'm still from high art. Art is always in strict codes. Graffiti very much so. I mean, you graffiti guys are so narrow. You should look more widely. There is so much to see. Commercial art is less strict, art still less. Art has broadened in the last few hundred years."

In his sketchbooks, Ed tries out different types of design, both letters and nonsense shapes.

"It's all about form, not about meaning. The forms I get from my whole life looking at forms and letters. The words are some kind of poetics. I start with one word, and then I add another."

Why is that such fun?

"I do these books all day long now. It gives me something to do. A retired farmer still keeps his garden, but instead of apples he grows beautiful flowers. I have my flower garden right here, they're just pretty, not to sell or eat. There's no reason for them, only as decoration."

What do you do if your inspiration runs out?

"It never does. How can it, with something like this! I can say to myself: 'I just wanna make Rs.' That's an inspiration. If I have no inspiration, I try it as yesterday, but then I add something. When you do your own works, inspiration never fails. But all pages aren't that inspired. They sometimes look pretty much the same."

Don't you ever fail?

"How can I fail? The fliers I spend a lot of time to do, hours and hours, but this stuff, it's just ideas. But that I can't fail also means I can never be right."

Tobias Barenthin Lindblad

CBS IS DEAD!
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